

HABS
DEL,
2-WILM,
40-

Old Town Hall (House of Burgesses)
512 Market Street Mall
Wilmington
New Castle
Delaware

HABS No. DE-96

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HABS
DEL,
2-WILM,
40-Old Town Hall

Name: House of Burgesses, Old Town Hall
Location: 512 Market Street Mall, Wilmington, New Castle
County, Delaware
Present Owner: The Historical Society of Delaware
Occupant: The Historical Society of Delaware
Use: Museum

Significance: Few buildings can boast of such a record of continual community service as Wilmington's Old Town Hall. From its erection in 1798 to the present, it has been a viable part of the City. It has kept pace with the needs of its citizens by serving as both a political base, a cultural center, and the City Goal. Today, it is one of only three extant public buildings in the area erected prior to 1800. It may be considered an architectural hallmark of historic Wilmington, for its refined details and graceful proportions make it exemplary of Georgian architecture.

Part 1. Historical Information

A. Physical history

1. Date of erection.

The minutes of the February 24, 1792 meeting of Wilmington's Council of Burgesses contain the first official mention of a need for a City Hall. Several years passed during which funds were raised and a lot was purchased for the new building. Construction began in January of 1798, but almost two years passed before even one room of the building was completed. The first Council meeting was held in Old Town Hall on December 4, 1799, although payment requests indicate the building was not substantially completed until well into 1800.

2. Architect.

The design of Old Town Hall has been attributed to Peter Bauduy, a French immigrant who designed several other contemporary structures. Council minutes suggest, however, that the design of the building was the responsibility of Councilmen John Way and Peter Brynberg. It is likely that, using the public buildings of neighboring cities as a prototype, the Councilmen submitted a rough sketch to a master builder who completed the details.

3. Builder/Contractor/Suppliers.

No information available.

4. Original Plan.

According to instructions given by Wilmington's Council of Burgesses on January 5, 1798, the Town Hall was to be "neat, convenient, and lasting." The desired design was to be basically utilitarian with a minimum of elaboration. "Prudence and discretion" were to be the builder's guiding principles.

"Resolved that the Commissioners appointed to carry the said plan into execution have the front on Market Street built in a plain handsome manner, the doorway to be rusticated but the corners plain. That they be authorized to build a bow in the back front and windows in the ends of the House and that cells for the confinement of disorderly persons be built in the cellar under the bow."

Similarities between Philadelphia's Old City Hall (1790-1791) and Wilmington's Old Town Hall suggest the former building served as a prototype in the design of the latter. Both buildings have a raised base, rectangular cupola, similar window and door arrangements, "gothick" sashes and transom, and a projecting middle bay.

5. Alterations and Additions.

Over the course of time, the Old Town Hall has undergone several alterations. In 1855, the Mayor of Wilmington announced a plan to enlarge and modify the Town Hall, and a committee was appointed to raise a cupola. Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan was consulted at this time, but the resulting plans were shelved. It is believed, however, that Sloan's plans may have been used at a later date. Although no extensive renovations were undertaken in 1855, several smaller changes did occur. The original steps were refitted in 1856. In 1858, gutters and downspouts were added and galvanized iron replaced the copper on the upper flat. The original painted clock face was replaced by a glass one circa 1868.

Extensive renovations did take place in 1875. These alterations effectively changed the building style from Georgian to the contemporary Queen Anne. Photographs indicate the building was given a large, heavy, polychromatic fire tower to replace the cupola. The "gothick" sashes were replaced by two-over-two sashes. Awnings were hung from the windows. The cornice was replaced by one more suitable to the building's new style. The wooden balustrade along the roof was replaced with iron

cresting. Two wings were added to the rear of the building to serve as a City prison and Police headquarters. To provide access to these wings, the bay windows at the rear of the building were converted to doorways. Windows on the second floor of the east side were bricked in.

Old Town Hall remained in this condition until it was purchased by the Old Town Hall Association in 1916. At that time, Edgar V. Seeler of Philadelphia, who was responsible for the restorative work done on Old Congress Hall, in Philadelphia, examined the building and submitted restoration plans. Restoration work was halted by the war and actual work on the building did not get underway until 1926. At that time, the southern side of the divided staircase was refitted. Vaults were placed in the basement. The back additions were removed and the rear wall was returned to its original configuration. When the work was completed a year later, the building was returned to what Seeler had determined to be its original appearance. In 1965 after an in-depth architectural study was done, several errors in the previous restoration such as the location of the Council Chamber, were corrected and extensive structural repairs were made.

B. Historical Context

From the time of its erection, Wilmington's Old Town Hall has been a popular site for both civic and social activities. Besides the regular meetings of the City Burgesses, prominent Delawareans such as Caesar Rodney and John Dickinson, signers of the Declaration of Independence, regularly met there. Receptions were also held for President Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and General Harrison. For more than 75 years after its erection in 1798, it served as the center for community and cultural life. Besides being used for an official town business, the U. S. District Court, the Society of Free Masons, Odd Fellows, the Wilmington Library, the Philosophical Society, the Abolition Society, and other groups regularly used the Town Hall as a meeting place. Its large first-floor assembly room often served as a ballroom during holiday celebrations. The two jail cells in the basement were so frequently in use that the need for more cells became obvious. Besides being used to confine the town's criminals, the jail cells were also used for emergency housing. The space problem was remedied in 1875 with the construction of two rear wings, which were used as Police Headquarters and the City Prison.

Upon completion of a new City/County Building on Rodney Square in 1916, Old Town Hall was vacated and offered for public auction by the City Council. A group of concerned citizens rallied to save the building from imminent

destruction by forming the Old Town Hall Association. The group managed to raise the \$90,517.50 price and purchased the building. Plans were made to restore the Hall and to use it as the home of the Historical Society of Delaware. The Society would use the building to house its library, offices, and museum. Architect Edgar V. Seeler of Philadelphia, who had recently worked on the restoration of Old Congress Hall, was employed for the restoration of Old Town Hall. Seeler studied the site for two months and prepared the restoration plans. World War I interrupted the restoration efforts temporarily and the building was used as the headquarters of the Delaware Chapter of the Red Cross until 1920. Because of a lack of funds, actual restoration work following Seeler's plans did not get underway until 1926. The estimated cost of the work was \$175,000. Today, Old Town Hall functions as a colonial museum with special collections of silver and furniture.

Part II. Architectural Information

Exterior Description:

Old Town Hall is a two and one-half story building of late Georgian styling. It has a load-bearing brick structural system with 13 1/4" thick sidewalls and a 17 3/4" thick front wall. The structure is built upon a quarry-stone foundation and has a raised masonry base with a water table. The base along the main facade of the building is veneered-dressed marble. The planned dimensions of the building were 52 feet 2 inches across the facade and 43 feet 2 inches deep. The front facade is composed of selected brick in flemish bond. The side and back walls are of common bond with unmatched brick. Belts of headers run across the side at every sixth course. Three bays comprise the main facade of the building. There is a slightly projecting pedimented central bay (28 feet 3 inches), and two side bays. The building's steps with handrails (circa 1875) lead up to the heavy panelled double doors in the central bay. The door is framed by marble pilasters supporting an arched fluted architrave with keystone. A "gothick" transom is above the door. The first floor windows have 12 over 12 lights with arched "gothick" sashes. The second floor windows are flat, and also have 12 over 12 lights. The voussiors are of stretcher bricks with marble keystones and a masonry belt course separates the two stories. A large clock surrounded by stretcher bricks and four keystones is placed in the middle of the central pediment. The rear wall has a five-sided bay from ground to cornice. Side openings are flat with keystones. The building has a flat-on-gable roof. A wooden balustrade runs between the double end chimneys. Surmounting the roof is an open octagonal cupola with a gilded weather vane. There is a brick annex on the southern side of the rear of the building.

Interior Description:

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The first floor of Old Town Hall is a single large room which was used for public meetings and other community activities. Its dimensions are 40' 2" by 50' 2", with a ceiling height of 17'. The room is symmetrically arranged with a single central entrance from the street. On each of the side walls, there are two fireplaces between three windows. In the center of the room, there are four Doric columns with elaborate capitals. These columns have no supportive function and serve mainly to articulate the large open space of the room. At the rear of the room is a large bow area under an elliptical arch. There is a rostrum within the bay area and a banister. Within the bow are three large windows and a door is located on either side of it. Flanking the center doorway and flush with the front wall is a divided staircase which leads to the building's upper stories.

From the landing of the divided staircase, a single staircase leads to the three rooms on the second floor. A center double door opens up into the Council Chamber. This room measures 30' 2" by 50' 2", and has a 14' 4" ceiling. Along each of the side walls is a fireplace along with two windows. The rear wall has a bow similar to that on the first floor. A window is on each side of the bow. The two rooms at the front of the window are virtually identical. They have similar dimensions and each has a single fireplace and a window along the side walls and two windows along the front wall. The southwest room was formerly the Mayor's Office and the northwest room was the Clerk's Office. A narrow staircase leads upward from the second floor to a landing where the exterior clock may be reached and then upward to the attic and the cupola. In the basement of the building located beneath the bow are two jail cells. Space in the basement was also used for various club meetings.

Site:

Old Town Hall, between Fifth and Sixth Streets, faces the northwesterly direction along the Market Street Pedestrian Mall, the center of retail activity in the City. A brick and wrought iron fence encloses its small front yard. Its back yard extends to King Street. Commercial buildings stand on either side of the building. Across Market Street from Old Town Hall is Willingtown Square, a group of six eighteenth-century structures which were relocated on the Mall in 1976.

Part III. Sources of Information

Bibliography:

Historical Society of Delaware. Old Town Hall, Wilmington, Delaware; Its Restoration and Use (Wilmington, Delaware, 1920).
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The nature and aspirations of the City of Wilmington has been revealed progressively through each of its three municipal buildings. From the simple, refined Historic Old Town Hall to the noble Public Building on Rodney Square, and finally to the efficient and modern new City/County Building, a history of growth and transition may be traced. This history and the buildings themselves speak eloquently of the City of Wilmington: its character, its citizens, and ultimately the City's view of itself. Wilmington's three municipal buildings are also representative of the evolution of urban American architecture. Each building is the manifestation of a distinct phase of the country's urban development, i.e., the post-revolutionary period of urban growth, the City Beautiful Movement of the early 20th century, and the urban renewal programs of the last two decades.

A SURVEY OF WILMINGTON'S CITY HALLS

This survey was prepared for
the America's City Halls Program
by the Department of Planning,
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with the cooperation with
the Delaware Society of Architects.

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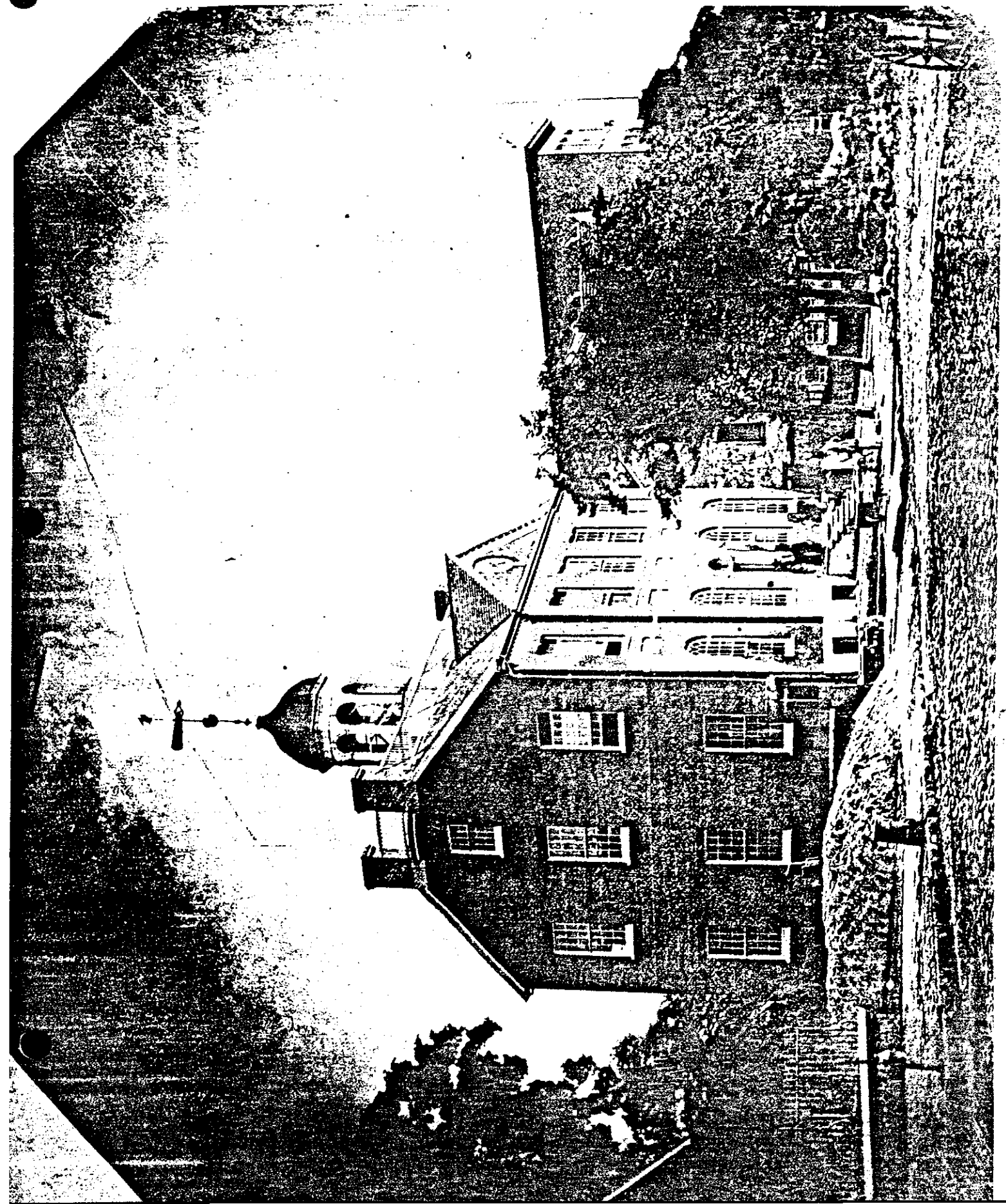
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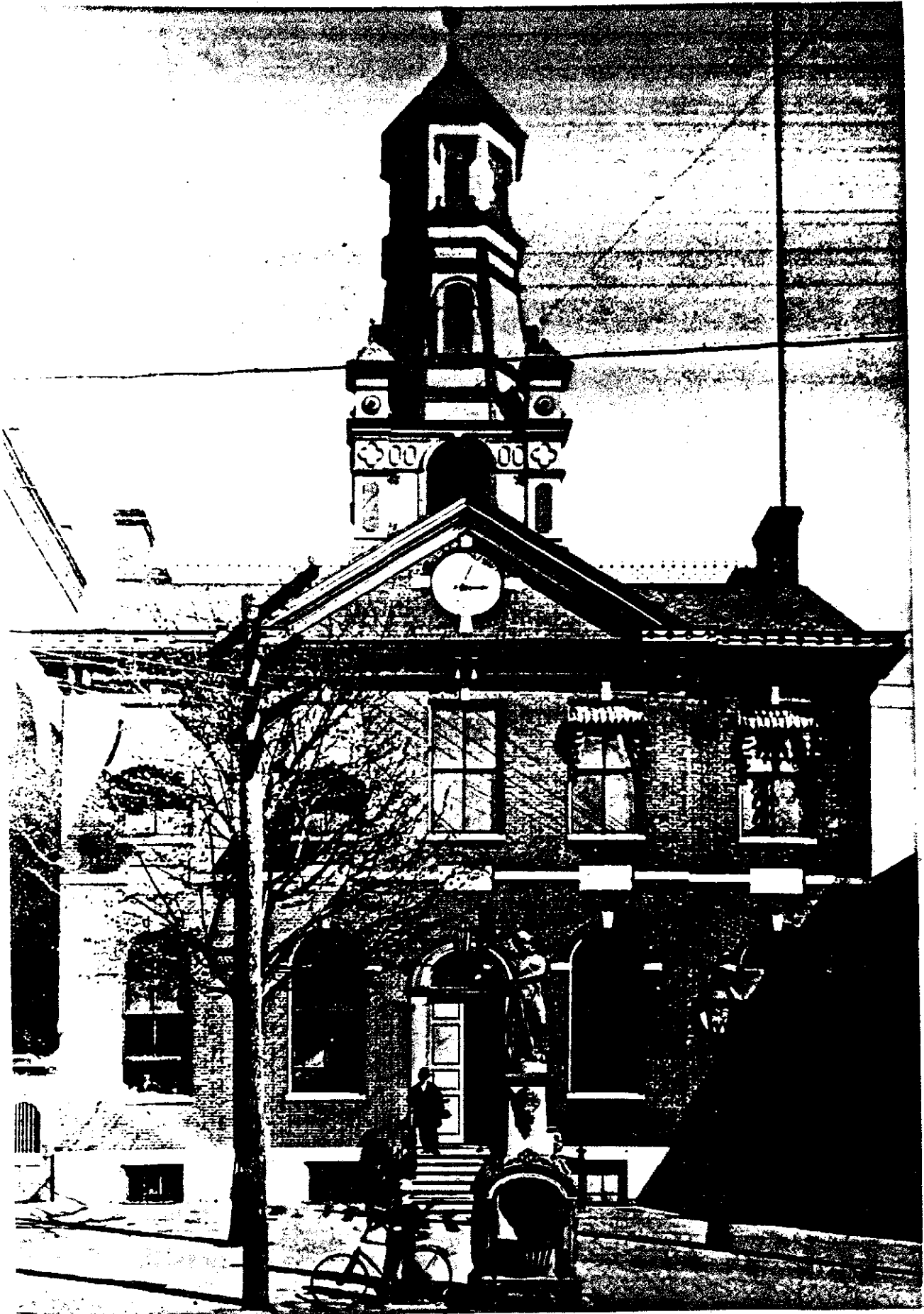
Courtesy of Historical Society of
Delaware

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Old Town Hall - 1860



Old Town Hall - Approximately 1893



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